Analysis of Job Competencies for Minnesota Family Investment Program Workers

MPA Capstone Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The state of Minnesota is undertaking an intervention to change the functioning and outcomes of the Minnesota Family investment Program (MFIP). As part of this work the Department of Human Services has commissioned the Humphrey School of Public Affairs capstone team to assess current research on frontline worker practices and gather information through interviews held across the state. The results will be used to develop a framework of research-based competencies to shape worker training.

Purpose and Research Design

To change the functioning and outcomes of MFIP, Minnesota must develop a service system that can adapt to the variety of needs of the people served. In order to understand how to develop such a service system, the research team conducted a literature review of both scholarly and practitioner literature and conducted interviews with 39 frontline workers from both the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area and Greater Minnesota. For purposes of this paper a frontline worker is defined as a Financial Worker, who is typically employed by county government and an Employment Services Worker, who can be employed by county government, a workforce center, or a private nonprofit entity.

The purpose of this research is to develop a framework of competencies that will shape training for frontline workers in order to lead to a new service orientation. The goals of the project are to:

- Learn from existing research conducted on frontline worker practices
- Increase knowledge of current frontline experiences and conditions on-the-ground in order to inform policy redesign efforts
- Shape frontline worker training to initiate a new service environment

The literature review outlines the current and historical research on the topic of frontline worker practices and the interviews conducted identify current frontline experiences and conditions in Minnesota. The literature review was conducted in five weeks and is not exhaustive of all possible sources. Priority was given to articles that referenced frontline worker competencies, as well as innovative practices in welfare reform, and research published since the mid to late nineties. Due to the short and definitive timeline in which data was to be collected, the interviews conducted were limited in detailed analysis. The research questions for this project were:

1. What does the research tell us about the necessary frontline skills and competencies needed in order to move families to stability?
2. What are the frontline realities facing Minnesota Family Investment Program workers today (motivation, barriers, what defines their work)?

Key Findings

A review of literature showed a gap in empirical research linking specific frontline welfare worker competencies to policy outcomes. Unlike Child Welfare training through the Federal Title IV-E program, there are no formal standards or training in place for frontline welfare workers. This can lead to inconsistent and inequitable provision of services that is dependent on the discretion of the frontline worker (Meyers, MacDonald, & Glaser, 1998; Morgen, 2001; Radey, 2008; Sandfort, 2000). The role of frontline workers changed dramatically in 1996 with the passage of federal welfare reforms. There is now less emphasis on strict eligibility determination and room for a more transformative role where discretion can be exercised. Case management and social work competencies fit this new role in terms of completing individualized assessments, clearly communicating information, and interpreting the program (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, 2009; Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; Radey, 2008). Additionally, a number of client barriers were noted both in the literature review and interviews as an important aspect that could undermine efforts towards positive outcomes. However, considering the scant information linking competencies to desired outcomes, more information on the complexities of frontline delivery of welfare services was examined.

The capstone research team conducted a total of 39 semi-structured interviews with MFIP frontline workers, 20 of whom were Financial Workers and 19 of whom were Employment Services Workers. The interviews were conducted with respondents from the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area (which included suburban counties) and Greater Minnesota, which incorporated both large and small-populated counties. The semi-structured interview method was chosen to allow the research team to fully explore the subject area through follow-up queries with the respondents. Data was also collected regarding years of employment and other programs with which they are connected.

A total of 38 competencies were identified with 12 of those 38 being mentioned at least 30% of the time. It is important to note that these were not competencies that workers necessarily felt they were skilled in, but instead were competencies they identified as being most important and necessary to improve outcomes for participants. The findings indicated that Referral was the most common competency identified by both Financial Workers and Employment Services Workers. Referral included not only referrals to employment services or jobs, but also referrals to community programs such as mental health, chemical health and domestic violence programs, as well as referrals to resources such as housing, childcare, and other public benefits. Employment Services Workers saw their role incorporating a wider range of competencies than Financial Workers. Financial Workers viewed their role as focused and targeted to specific tasks. Financial Workers overwhelmingly indicated the primary competencies needed were Policy Clarification and Referral, whereas Employment Services Workers indicated these competencies, but also Assessment, Goal Planning, Skill Building, Collaboration, and De-escalation.

The goal of the interviews was to identify competencies needed by frontline workers to move participants toward self-sufficiency. However, both Financial Workers and Employment Services Workers identified barriers that prevented them from helping

participants move towards self-sufficiency. Some examples of the barriers identified were: coordination and communication between Financial Workers and Employment Services Workers, lack of childcare, caseload size, and complex policy rules.

Recommendations

The research suggests that more than training alone is needed in order for frontline workers to help MFIP participants secure sustainable employment. Frontline workers also need to have the right competencies, attitudes, and on-going support in their role for them to effectively help participants become self-sufficient. The following recommendations outline improvements that should be considered in recruitment, training and performance management of the frontline workforce.

- Hiring practices should be evaluated and adjusted as necessary to focus on the competencies needed to help MFIP participants gain sustainable employment.
- Recruitment activities should consider whether potential workers have the attitudes and backgrounds to develop positive relationships with MFIP participants.
- Staff training programs should be mandatory when frontline workers are hired and also required on an on-going basis to further develop competencies.
- Staff development and support opportunities should also occur outside of formal classroom training programs.
- Supervisors should reinforce training and competency development through regular performance reviews and supervision.

Future Research

Due to the shortened and definitive timeframe for this project, the capstone research team would recommend further research be conducted regarding this topic. This would include a deeper analysis of the detailed interview data obtained from 39 Minnesota frontline workers. In addition, focus groups of frontline workers, as well as their managers and supervisors, should be considered to provide further ideas on improving MFIP outcomes. Most importantly, further research should be conducted with MFIP participants to link worker competencies with participant outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to reform welfare in 1996, congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which ended and replaced the sixty-five year old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. This new welfare system established the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program (TANF). TANF was designed to provide families temporary financial assistance and help them move towards employment. These changes established a new block grant funding structure along with important policy changes. These changes initiated a variety of institutional changes within the welfare system (Martinson & Holcomb, 2002). With this new act, states would now have more flexibility to develop detailed policy decisions in regards to how welfare would be implemented. In 2005, PRWORA was reauthorized to include changes that required strict requirements for defining, verifying and counting activities and hours of parents on TANF funded assistance. "This new service delivery system for welfare recipients included restructured staff responsibilities and services within the welfare agency and greater involvement by other organizations outside the welfare agency" (Martinson & Holcomb, 2002).

The main focus of PRWORA is "work first," thus there was a focus on quick labor force attainment, with less of an emphasis on skill development or long-term education. With this renewed focus, "work requirements narrowed, states required applicants to participate in work related activities, with many states requiring a specified number of hours searching for a job." In 2005, following the reauthorization of PRWORA, many states adopted a varied set of rules to comply with federal requirements, resulting in the design and implementation of sanction policies that reduced and or eliminated benefits for families that failed to meet the designated requirements" (Weil, 2002). While the welfare caseloads decreased across the country one factor remained the same, the dynamic nature of the welfare caseloads. Many welfare applicants face numerous barriers to employment such as; mental and chemical health issues, domestic violence, childcare attainment, etc. and these adverse experiences have only increased over the years (Weil, 2002).

Minnesota currently receives approximately $263 million dollars from the federal block grant to implement TANF. Minnesota also contributes state dollars as appropriated by the state legislature. Minnesota has two cash assistance programs, the Diversionary Work Program (DWP) and the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). DWP is a four-month program of intensive job search services for families who have not been on MFIP in the last twelve months. MFIP includes, family stabilization services (FSS) for the most challenged families, families who have been extended beyond 60 months and "child only" families – in which only the children are counted for the amount of assistance. Minnesota utilizes the 87 counties and tribes to administer both the DWP and MFIP programs. Counties are responsible to determine eligibility, issue benefits, contract for employment services and decide who qualifies for MFIP extensions past 60 months under state policy and develops the process for making that decision, and finally decides whether to link MFIP to other county services (Schlick, 2014).

Guiding families out of poverty and towards self-sufficiency is a complex and dynamic process. The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) utilizes

multiple frontline workers in employment and financial services in order to support families in this endeavor. Even though these case workers help the same individual, 33% spoke about there being a disconnect between the financial services and employment services counselors. These inconsistencies may create barriers for individuals stabilizing their lives and difficulty transitioning off of government support.

The state of Minnesota is working to change the performance measures for the Minnesota Family Investment Program, in order to focus more on outcomes and to change how the program functions. A transition to focus on outcomes will create the room for a service system that can adapt to the variety of needs of the people served. The purpose of this project is to conduct research to develop a framework of competencies that will shape training for frontline workers leading to a new service orientation. The goals of the project were to:

- Learn from existing research conducted on frontline worker practices
- Increase knowledge of current frontline experiences and conditions on-the-ground in order to inform policy redesign efforts
- Shape frontline worker training to initiate a new service environment

LITERATURE REVIEW

Methodology

The research team examined over 40 peer-reviewed journal articles pertaining to frontline welfare worker practices and conditions as well as professional reports on innovative employment programs. To find relevant literature, search engines including JSTOR and Google Scholar were used through the University of Minnesota Libraries system with combinations of keywords like “welfare reform,” “frontline workers,” “employment,” and “competencies.” The research team narrowed the articles and reports to 21, focusing on frontline conditions, frontline worker skills, or welfare-to-work programs. To find relevant professional reports, organizational websites of nonprofits including Abt Associates, MDRC, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Wilder Research, and the Urban Institute were searched. Local and national experts were also contacted to provide potential sources of information.

Introduction

In conducting a survey of literature since the implementation of TANF in the late-1990s, few articles addressed the competencies of frontline welfare workers or even how they were linked to the policy goal of self-sufficiency. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of what is known about the complexities of welfare work at the frontlines, other aspects of service delivery that may inhibit workers from forming a positive and productive relationship with clients are included. Due to the complexities of frontline human services work, there are many other dimensions that may impact client outcomes. To address some of these aspects such as the changing role of workers, the worker-client relationship, and structural constraints, an overview of additional literature is reviewed in Appendix D. Frontline worker competencies, client barriers and innovative employment programs are explored in the following section.

Worker Competencies and Skills

Unlike Child Welfare training through the Federal Title IV-E program, there are no formal standards or training in place for frontline welfare workers. This can lead to inconsistent and inequitable provision of services that is dependent on the discretion of the frontline worker (Meyers et al., 1998; Morgen, 2001; Radey, 2008; Sandfort, 2000). The role of frontline workers changed dramatically in 1996 with the passage of federal welfare reforms. There is now less emphasis on strict eligibility determination and room for a more transformative role where discretion can be exercised. Case management and social work competencies were found to fit this new role in terms of completing individualized assessments, clearly communicating information, and interpreting the program (Austin et al., 2009; Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; Radey, 2008). If workers do not perform an accurate assessment of clients' barriers, then the clients may be put at risk for an inappropriate sanction or a delay in receiving proper services and interventions (Nguyen & Wagner, 2004; Radey, 2008). In a study of parents on MFIP and their understanding of assessments, it was noted that "the experience of assessments is directly related to the quality and training of the job counselor in a range of social service fields" (Nguyen & Wagner, 2004). A client may not want to share personal information such as domestic violence experience in the home or substance abuse and it would be especially difficult to obtain that information if the client did not have a positive and trusting relationship with their worker. In addition to performing assessments, workers need to provide complete and accurate information. Clients may go without services they qualify for because many workers fail to supply the appropriate information (Radey, 2008). Furthermore, workers need to be able to interpret the program to help the client navigate resources. The worker uses their discretion to determine the services and/or exceptions the client receives (Radey, 2008).

In a survey of frontline workers across California, the four most needed skill areas included case management, interviewing, listening and treating participants with dignity and respect (Austin et al., 2009). Also in that survey, the four most needed knowledge areas identified were principles of counseling, education and employment requirements, community service providers and resources, and understanding of barriers clients face (Austin et al., 2009). Staff identified an understanding of diversity as a low-priority (Austin et al., 2009).

Client Barriers

In addition to frontline worker competencies, a focus on client barriers is strongly recommended to improve client outcomes (Brown, 2001). Client barriers vary in severity and number and depend on a diverse set of individual clients. Workers believe that behavioral problems and a lack of community support had a significant impact for clients becoming self-sufficient (Austin et al., 2009). In a survey of welfare workers from 11 counties in California, childcare and transportation functioned well while affordable housing was deficient (Austin et al., 2009). However, in one county in Michigan, it was reported that workers saw childcare as a barrier to work along with the acceptance of welfare as a lifestyle (Sandfort, Kalil, & Gottschalk, 1999). The overlaps and differences in client barriers indicate how complex the delivery of services is for a diverse population. Disincentives to employment are another client barrier and included inadequate wages, day-care costs, losing health benefits, and

policies that do not make self-sufficiency an attainable goal (Sandfort et al., 1999). In a comprehensive guide on how to help hard-to-employ people succeed in the workforce, MDRC noted "seven factors that emerged through both research and program experience as significant barriers to employment for a subset of welfare recipients including substance abuse, domestic violence, physical disabilities and chronic health problems, depression and other mental health problems, criminal records, very low basic skills and learning disabilities, and language barriers" (Brown, 2001).

Innovative Employment Programs

In order to improve service delivery, more complex and refined empirical research is needed to try and understand how components of Job Search Assistance (JSA) programs affect client outcomes. Abt Associates, Inc. compiled a report for the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation that examines design options for strategies of rigorously evaluating TANF job search assistance programs (Peck, Bell, Klerman, & Juras, 2013). A conceptual framework for JSA includes the State TANF Program Rules and Goals, Job Seeker's Traits, Abilities and Interest, and the Local Labor Market Conditions (Peck et al., 2013). The mechanisms that JSA programs affect job search are as an Assistance Mechanism, Training Mechanism and Enforcement Mechanism (Peck et al., 2013). Given the complexities of evaluation design, an overview is not presented here. For more detailed information on the comprehensive and intricate evaluation strategies, please reference the report (Peck et al., 2013).

As an answer to this call for more empirical research, the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency "is a next-generation test of promising interventions for low-income families sponsored by the federal Administration for Children and Families" (Fein, 2009). Also led by Abt Associates, Inc., ISIS is currently testing nine career pathways programs around the country (Gardiner, 2014). The programs vary in different ways including the lead organization, target population, occupational focus, steps on a career pathway and service strategies (Gardiner, 2014). This research is currently in progress and will include an impact study, implementation study, and cost-benefit study (Gardiner, 2014).

Recommendations

Recruitment

The Annie E. Casey Foundation report suggests hiring for the core competencies desired in the frontline workforce as there is a need for more quality staff (*The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, 2003). In addition to competencies, examining candidates for attitude about welfare clients, poverty and deservingness was noted (Austin et al., 2009; Oberfield, 2014; *The Issues Behind the Outcomes for Somali, Hmong, American Indian and African American Welfare Participants*, 2003). Motivation was another factor to potentially screen in candidates. In a longitudinal study for frontline welfare workers bureaucratic socialization, it was found that "welfare caseworkers were primarily motivated by the job's benefits over the two years of study" and that the motives tended to be the same over time (Oberfield, 2014). Potential strategies include screening for altruistic motivation and eliminate egoistic motivation as well as to identify new and diverse

candidate pools (Brown, 2001; Oberfield, 2014; *The Issues Behind the Outcomes for Somali, Hmong, American Indian and African American Welfare Participants*, 2003).

Training

There was a noticeable call for intensive training of frontline welfare workers (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; T. Hill & Cain, 2012; Meyers et al., 1998; Nguyen & Wagner, 2004; Radey, 2008; *The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, 2003). More specifically, Radey (2008) recommends a social work education and training for welfare caseworkers (Radey, 2008). Similarly, Hill & Cain suggest "welfare caseworkers…could benefit from professional social work skill building, including active-listening, rapport-building, and problem-solving skills development" (T. Hill & Cain, 2012). Lastly, it was suggested there be ongoing opportunities for staff development and support (Brown, 2001; Oberfield, 2014; Sandfort, 1999; *The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, 2003).

Performance Management

In addition to recruiting the right people, and training, performance management is an area of interest. The Annie E. Casey Foundation report on frontline workers noted that there need to be "rewards for superior performance and effectiveness" and "clear performance expectations that relate to a coherent organizational mission" (*The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, 2003).

INTERVIEWS

Methodology

Instruments and Data Collection

The research team conducted semi-structured phone interviews with 39 Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) frontline workers, 20 of whom were Financial Workers and 19 of whom were Employment Services Workers. The Semi-Structured Interview method was used because the design included open-ended questions, allowing the team to fully explore individual subject areas and gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' perspective. The research team was also seeking to gain the independent thought of each individual, and open-ended questions allowed the team the greatest ability to pursue leads and probe the respondent (Wholey, Joseph S; Hatry, Harry P.; Newcomer, 2010). In addition, the Semi-Structured Interview method complimented the Employment Services Caseload Data Request, a larger-scale closed-question survey of frontline staff conducted in Winter 2014. The Semi-Structured Interview is a suitable option to explore content that could not be addressed in a larger-scale survey.

Though the goal was to collect information about what competencies were most important to moving participants to self-sufficiency, none of the questions directly asked what competencies were used, nor was the term "competency" used in the interview. Instead respondents were asked to think about a challenging situation or case, and then were asked a series of questions about what approaches they used that were most effective, as well as what they wish they could have done differently.

The interview also posed a scenario, which entailed a challenging situation about a frustrated participant with multiple barriers, who had been sanctioned. Respondents were then asked how they would respond to the participant, what they think would influence outcomes, what knowledge they would draw upon, and how they might reach out for peer support. In addition to the scenario questions, respondents were asked closed-ended questions such as; how many years had they worked in their current position and other programs with which they work. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

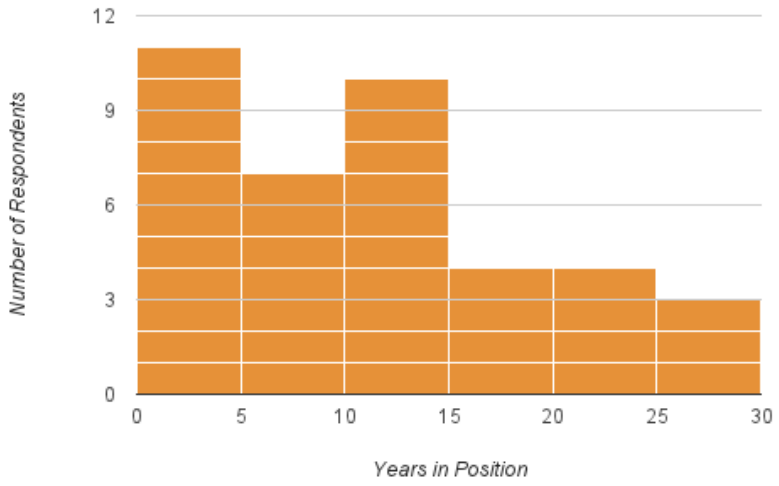
The research team began each interview with an explanation of the project and clearly identified how the information collected would be used. They explained that the information collected would remain confidential and all data would be reported on the aggregate, and would not identify any particular respondents. Interviews were scheduled to run 30 minutes, but in many cases ran longer at the request of the respondent.

Sample

Thirty-five females and four males were interviewed from the following counties: three from Becker, four from Clay, ten from Dakota, ten from Hennepin, nine from Olmsted and three from Otter Tail. For the purpose of this paper, and to protect anonymity, respondents from Becker, Clay, Olmsted and Otter Tail Counties were categorized as Greater Minnesota workers and respondents from Dakota and Hennepin Counties were categorized as Metropolitan Area workers. Twenty-nine respondents were county employees and ten worked for other social service agencies including; Workforce Development, CAPI, Goodwill Easter Seals, LifeTrack and Project for Pride in Living.

Length of time respondents had been in their position ranged from 0.5 years to 27 years, with the average being 10.71 years. See Figure 1 for details regarding years in MFIP position.

Figure 1 - Years in MFIP Position



Problems and limitations

Since this data collection was part of a capstone project through the Humphrey Institute, there was a short and definitive timeline in which data was to be collected. This timeline limited the research team to analyzing the data on a high level, extracting mainly broad themes and findings. The analysis reflects an important first step and it is recommended that the raw data be used for further analysis.

Results

Interview Findings/Analysis

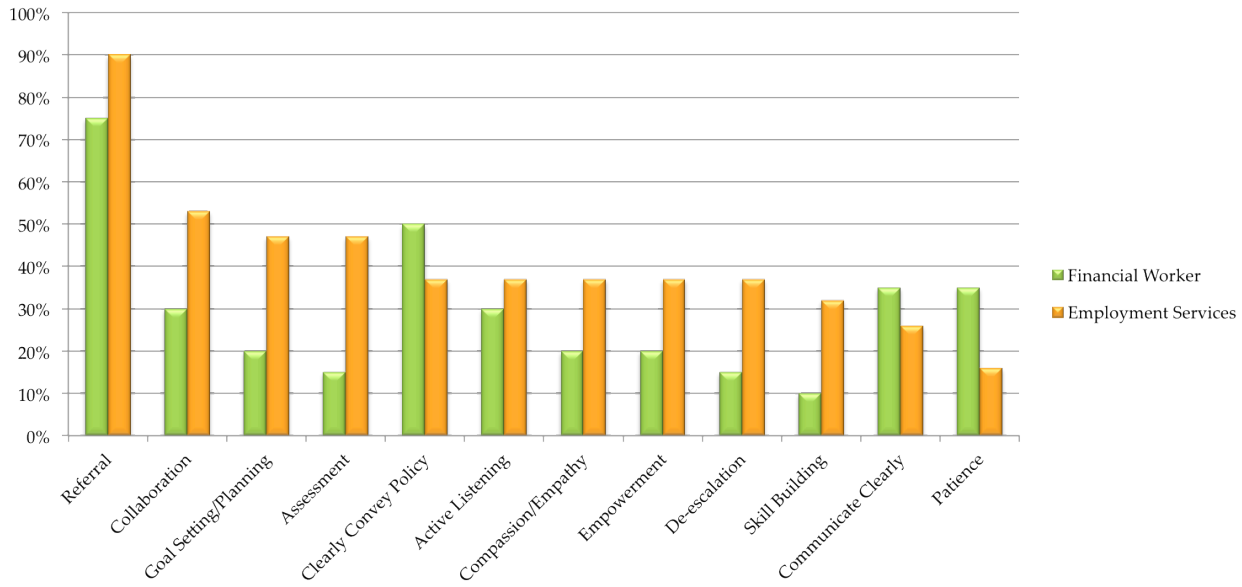
A total of 38 competencies were identified with 17 of those 38 being mentioned by at least 20% of respondents. It is important to note that these were not competencies that workers necessarily felt they had or that they were skilled in, but instead were competencies that they identified as being most important and most necessary in order to help the client move towards self-sufficiency. Figure 2 shows the competencies that were mentioned by respondents at least 20% of the time (see Appendix B for a complete list of the 38 competencies identified). The competencies are organized into four competency themes, which include Interpersonal Skills, Technical Skills, Teamwork Skills, and Counseling Skills. These categories serve as a simple ways to organize the competencies, and it is possible that some competencies could fall into more than one category.

Figure 2 - Top Competencies Identified in Interviews

Respondents represented Employment Services Workers (*n*=19) and Financial Workers (*n=20).* Figure 3 shows that both worker types identified Referral as the most important competency (90% Employment Services Worker and 75% Financial Worker). Referral included not only connections to employment services or jobs, but

also referrals to community programs including mental health, chemical health, and domestic violence programs as well as referrals to resources such as housing, childcare, and other public benefits.

Figure 3 - Top Competencies Identified by Job Type



Employment Services Workers saw their role incorporating a wider range of competencies than did the Financial Workers. Employment Services Workers reported 12 competencies at least 30% of the time, while Financial Workers reported four competencies at least 30% of the time. This suggests that Financial Workers saw their role as much more focused, and targeted to specific tasks, whereas Employment Services Workers saw their role as broader. The quotes below illustrate this.

"I'm supposed to manage the case, be the navigator to help the client tap into resources. I find myself doing more than that. I will call different low income housing for example, to make sure they have a roof over their head. Or refer them to shelter, or help them pay their bills. Some clients don't know how to do that. My title doesn't really reflect the work I do."

-Employment Services Worker-Metropolitan Area

"Help them with career and educational counseling, but there are a lot of survival basic needs issues that need to be addressed. I'm not a social worker and am not trained for that, but I do a lot of it. 75% of my time is spent on social service issues."

-Employment Services Worker-Greater Minnesota

"Our role is to get them money for their basic needs."

-Financial Worker-Greater Minnesota

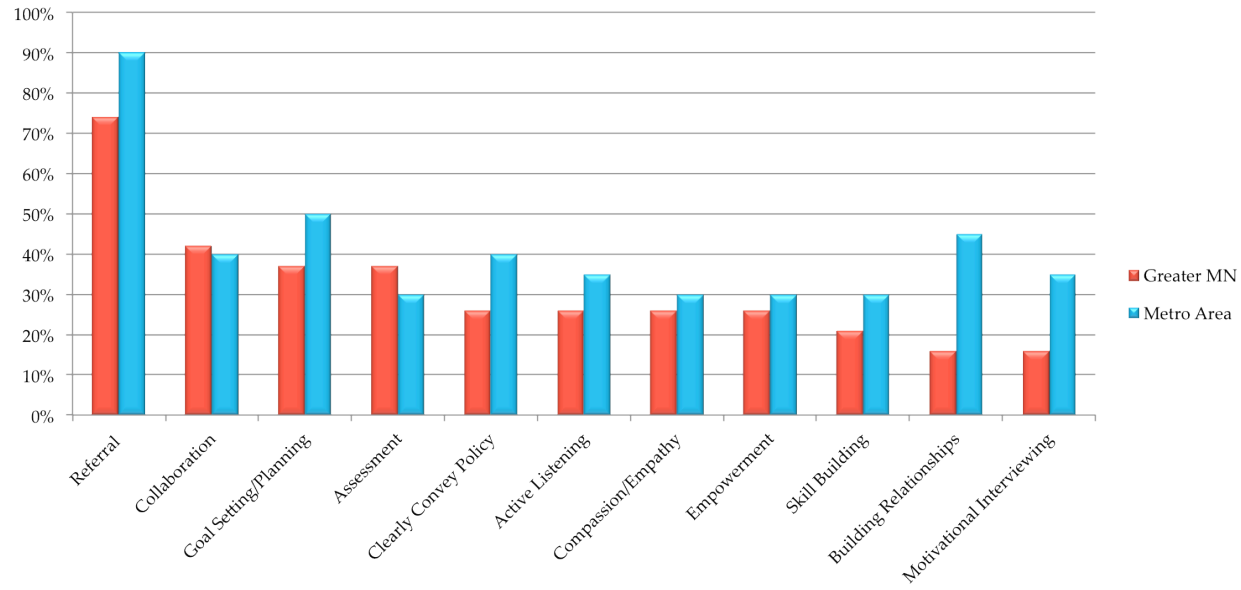
"I think our role should be bigger, but it is minimal. What it entails is just processing the benefits. We approve eligibility. We close the case if over income. We do not have enough interaction to help people become self-sufficient. I would like to see it develop into something where we can do some skills planning with people like budgeting, life skills, and financial literacy."

-Financial Worker-Metropolitan Area

Financial Workers overwhelmingly indicated the primary competencies needed were Policy Clarification and Referral, whereas Employment Services Workers not only indicated these competencies, but also Assessment, Goal Planning, Skill Building, Collaboration, and De-escalation. These competencies are where the research team found the greatest variances in the number of times they were mentioned between worker types (Assessment-32% variance, Collaboration-23% variance, and De-escalation, Goal Planning and Skill Building-all with 22% variances).
Figure 4 identifies competencies by region, which were for the most part very similar, and workers from both areas overwhelmingly identified Referral as the most important competency used (90% of Metropolitan Area respondents and 74% of Greater Minnesota respondents).

The competencies that had the greatest variance between regional areas were Relationship Building, and Communicate Clearly, with 19% and 29% variance respectfully (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Top Competencies Identified by Regional Area



Barriers Identified in Interviews

The focus of the interviews was on competencies that were most effective in helping clients become self-sufficient, but during the interviews, both Financial Workers and Employment Services Workers identified several barriers that prevented them from helping participants move towards self-sufficiency. The top barriers are identified in Table 1. A few quotes from workers that illustrate these barriers include:

"Often times when we meet with people for the first time, their goal is education. But the problem with DWP and MFIP is that we cannot support any long-term training programs. The goal is self-sufficiency so it is hard to support long-term training programs because the goal is to get a job. There are also glitchy policy rules."

-Financial Worker-Metropolitan Area

"We used to work together closely and there is a continuing need to share information regarding different pieces of the case. But now, we don't have regular discussions with Employment Services. It is written communications using status reports. Less teamwork and coordination due to case banking. Incredibly important to be in communication or something falls through the cracks."

-Financial Worker-Greater Minnesota

"High caseloads make it hard to help-hard to have one-on-one meetings when you have 80 clients, just can't spend a lot of time with them doing activities like filling out job applications."

-Employment Services Worker-Metropolitan Area

"This is just my experience, but I don't feel [financial workers] have any role in self-sufficiency. They are there to manage the monetary aspect of the program…..But in regards to self-sufficiency they have absolutely nothing to do in that aspect. They don't understand the pressures that Employment Counselors are under with regards to matrixes and goals, and when they are behind in their paperwork, how it effects the staff and clients. They have no clue what the stressors are on us. They have no reason or interest in self-sufficiency."

-Employment Services Worker-Greater Minnesota

Table 1 - Top Barriers Identified

Coordination/Communication Between Financial Workers and Employment Services Workers	33%
Childcare	26%
Caseload Size	21%
Complex Policy Rules	21%
Transportation	18%
Lack of Resources	18%

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Humphrey School capstone group conducted research on frontline worker practices to gather information to help shape worker training with the long-term goal of improving the self-sufficiency of MFIP participants. The research suggests that more than training alone is needed in order for frontline workers to help MFIP participants secure sustainable employment. Frontline workers also need to have the right competencies, attitudes, and on-going support in their role to create a service system that can meet the needs of the people served. The following recommendations outline possible improvements that should be considered in recruitment, training and performance management of the frontline workforce.

Recruitment

Organizational hiring practices should consider incorporating the top 12 competencies identified by Minnesota frontline workers as being most important in helping MFIP participants move towards self-sufficiency. In addition, recruitment activities should consider whether potential workers have the attitudes and backgrounds to assist MFIP participants. An analysis of the research data leads to the following recommendations for worker recruitment programs.

Identify new and diverse candidate pools

Frontline workers should reflect the diversity of the MFIP population. Participants face additional barriers when workers don't understand their life experiences and backgrounds (Wilder Research Center, 2003). To implement a new service system, county and nonprofit entities should seek workers with fresh perspectives. Organizations should develop new recruitment protocols to locate and attract workers from different sources (Oberfield, 2014). One potential new employee pool could include hiring former welfare recipients who have faced and overcome the same barriers as program participants. These "peers" can serve as important role models to motivate and support participants (Brown, 2001).

Screen for attitude

Welfare participants have reported that frontline workers who seek to establish positive relationships and treat them with dignity and respect play an important role in helping them attain employment (Austin et al., 2009, Wilder Research Center, 2003). Research has shown that welfare case workers mostly maintain the same attitudes they expressed when beginning their new jobs (Oberfield, 2014). Therefore, it is important to screen for positive or "helping attitudes" of candidates during the job selection process (Radey, 2008).

Training Programs

Training programs should consider incorporating the top 12 competencies identified by Minnesota frontline workers as being most important in helping MFIP participants become self-sufficient. Professional development opportunities that impact multiple competency areas, such as Motivational Interviewing, should be prioritized. An analysis of the research data leads to the following recommendations for worker training programs.

Require both initial and on-going staff training

Training on the core competencies should be provided when new staff joins the organization. In addition, on-going training should be required for frontline workers to ensure continual learning and alignment with MFIP priorities. This training should be mandatory and not optional for workers. Interviews with Minnesota's frontline workers indicated that many feel so busy with daily issues and crisis management that they do not take the time to attend education programs needed to advance their competencies.

Provide multiple opportunities for staff development and support

Staff development should also occur outside of formal classroom training programs. In one program, specialized staff was available to serve clients with serious barriers to employment. These specialists also provided training and support to frontline workers. In smaller regions, offices shared a specialized staff member (Brown, 2001). Case Conferencing is another way to provide on-going staff development. Structured group meetings are held where case managers share problems and ideas so that staff members can learn from one another on an on-going basis (Brown, 2001).

Research indicates that workers are shaped more by the people with whom they interact on a regular basis than by formal influences (Oberfield, 2014, Sandfort 2000). One Minnesota county utilizes Coaching Circles to provide frontline workers with a continual source of peer learning and support. Mentoring programs have also been used to pair new employees with experienced staff to provide on-going support in real life situations.

Performance Evaluations

Today, there is a strong focus on MFIP performance metrics within staff evaluations. The capstone research team recommends that supervisors consider reinforcing training and competency development through regular performance reviews and supervision. Personal development plans could incorporate competency development goals for each staff member. Worker recognition and status, should be tied to advancement on these goals (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). Aligning performance evaluations with core competencies could reinforce the on-going emphasis on competency development as a means to improve services to MFIP participants.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to develop a framework of research based competencies to further shape worker training; the capstone team recommends that additional research be conducted. Due to the limited timeframe of this project, the research team recommends that a deeper analysis of the frontline worker interview data be conducted. It may also be important to conduct further research through focus groups of frontline workers, supervisors and managers, to confirm the representativeness of the findings. Finally, the research team was not able to represent the client's perspective through this project of what they deem as

important competencies of a frontline worker. The research team suggests conducting focus groups with MFIP clients who have successfully transitioned to sustainable employment. The research questions should focus on which competencies of frontline workers helped them achieve successful employment outcomes.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked as an employment services (or financial) worker?

2. Can you tell me a little about what other programs you have besides MFIP and also a little about how your work is structured?

3. On a scale of 1 to 10-with 1 being very easy and 10 is very hard-how easy is it for participants to get their needs met through MFIP? Why?

4. Helping families move toward self-sufficiency is complex, how would you describe your role as an employment services worker (or financial worker) in that effort.
    a. Follow up question: How do you see the role of the financial worker (or employment services worker) in this effort?

5. In the current system, can you tell me how well collaboration works between financial services and employment services?
    a. Follow up questions: Can you give me an example of when it works well, and when it doesn't?

6. Think back on a case that you remember being particularly challenging:
    a. What approaches did you use that were most useful?
    b. What do you wish you could have done that would have been more helpful?

7. In an effort to gain understanding of the skills frontline workers use to address client situations we are going to pose a scenario, followed by a series of questions.

Scenario:
Samantha is a 32-year-old single mother of two children that you have been working with. She dropped out of high school and had spent most of her childhood on welfare programs. Samantha has a history of mental health and chemical dependency issues. Samantha comes to you upset and highly agitated because she has just learned that she is being sanctioned for noncompliance with her employment plan.

- How would you respond to this situation and why?
- What might influence what happens?
- What resources and knowledge would you draw upon?
- What peer support would you draw upon?
- When you think about helping Samantha in the short term, how would you respond? Why?
- When you think about helping Samantha in the long term, how would you respond? Why?

8. If you could start with a blank slate, what would you change with regards to how services are administered to MFIP participants?

Appendix B – Competencies Identified by Worker Type

Competency Identified	By Number-Employment Services	By Number-Financial Worker	By percentage of total respondents-Employment Services	By percentage of total respondents-Financial Worker
Accessible	1	2	5%	10%
Active Listening	7	6	37%	30%
Advocate	3	2	16%	10%
Assessment	9	3	47%	15%
Breaking Patterns	2	0	11%	10%
Building Rapport	2	0	11%	10%
Building Relationships	5	5	26%	25%
Collaboration	10	6	53%	30%
Communicate Clearly	5	7	26%	35%
Compassion/Empathy	7	4	37%	20%
Counseling	2	0	11%	0%
Creativity	3	0	16%	0%
Customer Service Skills	0	1	0%	5%
De-escalation	7	3	37%	15%
Efficient	0	1	0%	5%
Eligibility Approver	0	1	0%	5%
Empowerment	7	4	37%	20%
Flexibility	2	2	11%	10%
Follow up	1	2	5%	10%
Goal Setting/Planning	9	4	47%	20%
Holistic	1	0	5%	0%
Mediate	1	0	5%	0%
Motivational Interviewing	4	1	21%	5%
Motivator	3	2	16%	10%
Navigator	3	3	16%	15%
Non Judgmental	4	0	21%	0%
Paperwork Processor	0	4	0%	20%
Patience	3	7	16%	35%

Persistence	1	0	5%	0%
Policy Clarification	7	10	37%	50%
Problem Solver	2	1	11%	5%
Read Body language	0	1	0%	5%
Referral	17	15	90%	75%
Self Care	0	1	0%	5%
Skill Building	6	2	32%	10%
Strength-based	2	0	11%	0%
Supportive	4	1	21%	5%
Validate	1	3	5%	15%

Appendix C – Competencies Identified by Geographic Area

Competency Identified	By Number-Metro Area	By Number-Greater MN	By percentage of respondents-Metro Area	By percentage of respondents-Greater MN
Accessible	3	0	15%	0%
Active Listening	6	7	30%	37%
Advocate	4	1	20%	5%
Assessment	7	5	35%	26%
Breaking Patterns	1	1	5%	5%
Building Rapport	1	1	5%	5%
Building Relationships	7	3	35%	16%
Collaboration	8	8	40%	42%
Communicate Clearly	9	3	45%	16%
Compassion/Empathy	6	5	30%	26%
Counseling	1	1	5%	5%
Creativity	1	2	5%	11%
Customer Service Skills	1	0	5%	0%
De-escalation	6	4	30%	21%
Efficient	1	0	5%	0%
Eligibility Approver	0	1	0%	5%
Empowerment	6	5	30%	26%
Flexibility	2	2	10%	11%
Follow up	0	3	0%	16%

Goal Setting/Planning	8	5	40%	26%
Holistic	0	1	0%	5%
Mediate	1	0	5%	0%
Motivational Interviewing	4	1	20%	5%
Motivator	3	2	15%	11%
Navigator	3	3	15%	16%
Non Judgmental	2	2	10%	11%
Paperwork Processor	2	2	10%	11%
Patience	5	5	25%	26%
Persistence	1	0	5%	0%
Policy Clarification	10	7	50%	37%
Problem Solver	2	1	10%	5%
Read Body language	0	1	0%	5%
Referral	18	14	90%	74%
Self Care	1	0	5%	0%
Skill Building	5	3	25%	16%
Strength-based	1	1	5%	5%
Supportive	1	4	5%	21%
Validate	3	1	15%	5%

Appendix D – Other Dimensions of Frontline Welfare Work

Changing Role of Front-line Welfare Workers

With the passage of PRWORA, workers no longer play a strict rule-bound eligibility role and now it has expanded to include discretionary functions (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; Morgen, 2001). Welfare-to-work programs need to be "intensive, long-term, and individualized" (Iversen, 1998). The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported on frontline human service worker conditions and noted that it "is characterized by low pay, heavy workloads, and excessive regulation. Lack of training and poor support cause many to leave the field…" (*The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce*, 2003). In this new service delivery system, "…demands may be placed on frontline workers to provide more personal social services" (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002). In a study of 191 current or recent welfare recipients in Minnesota, focus groups examined the gap between outcomes for Somali, Hmong, American Indian and African American welfare participants. Given the complexities of the needs of each population, the findings noted that, "the greatest opportunity for improving the chances of success for these populations lies in strengthening provisions for individualized support for their progress toward self-sufficiency. That begins with well-prepared job counselors with caseloads that allow them to gain an accurate understanding of the recipient's situation and need for help

with work readiness" (*The Issues Behind the Outcomes for Somali, Hmong, American Indian and African American Welfare Participants*, 2003).

However, there are no formal training requirements for frontline workers who will be implementing the policies, where workers may introduce their own personal biases resulting in an inequitable delivery of services (Meyers et al., 1998; Morgen, 2001; Radey, 2008; Sandfort, 2000). An example of this variable use of discretion was tested in four focus groups in New York where frontline workers were given a set of case vignettes. They were asked to rank them based on whether they would qualify for an exemption from welfare requirements. "The lack of agreement among participants about the rank ordering of case vignettes suggests that, without clear agency criteria and priorities accompanied by intensive training of frontline workers, the granting hardship and domestic violence exemptions is a difficult task for workers to complete and highly dependent on an individual worker's judgment and discretion" (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002).

Hill was able to systematically link casework job design, a feature of local offices, to outcomes of increased income and decreased welfare receipt (C. Hill, 2005). MDRC survey data of three different programs was utilized including Greater Avenues for Independence in California, Project Independence in Florida and the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies in California, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Oregon. Overall, the study found that the "use of unified case management and job development specialists are positively associated with earnings but not statistically associated with welfare benefits (C. Hill, 2005).

Worker-Client Relationship

The worker-client relationship is often seen as adversarial (Nguyen & Wagner, 2004; Sandfort et al., 1999) and hierarchical, making it hard to form a positive relationship (Radey, 2008). Workers have been found to stereotype clients as well (Radey, 2008; Sandfort et al., 1999). Typologies reported from interviews were "clients that abuse the system, clients who are hostile, and clients who are deserving of assistance" (Sandfort et al., 1999). These typologies appeared to influence how workers treated clients but were not consistently applied or mutually exclusive. Clients also categorized the workers into two categories "good" being described as "pleasant, personable, treat clients with self-respect, and provide tips about how to get around unreasonable requirements" or "bad" which was described as "frequently bothering clients, checking up on their activities and were dismissive or cold in face to face interviews" (Sandfort et al., 1999). However these typologies were not linked to positive self-sufficiency results (Sandfort et al., 1999).

The worker-client relationship is also complicated by the way that clients view the welfare system. There is an adversarial perspective clients often have towards the system as well. The four categories depicting the clients' view of the welfare system are "1.) The system is designed to hinder their own efforts to improve their lives; 2.) They believe frontline staff have a personal stake in imposing the requirements of the system; 3.) They experience the application of administrative policy as random and inconsistent; 4.) Clients believe their interactions with the system are demeaning and deplete their self-confidence" (Sandfort et al., 1999). It is not surprising that this

view of the welfare system mirrors the clients' experiences in the system. Clients discuss the "lack of trust in workers, haphazard application of policy and procedure, and the embarrassment they feel at the welfare office"(Sandfort et al., 1999).

Client-worker relationships are built off of direct face-to-face interactions. Sixty-six worker-client interactions were observed during California's "Work Pays Campaign" and looked for the frequency (*content of information*) that workers mentioned employment-related welfare reforms and (*exercise of positive discretion),* where the worker individualized the communication of the new self-sufficiency expectations expressed in the policy changes (Meyers et al., 1998). "Direct observation of worker-client transactions suggested that communication of information about welfare reforms was limited, and the exercise of positive discretion to interpret these was intermittent" (Meyers et al., 1998). The four communication/positive discretion typologies were generated from the worker-client transactions:

- *Transformational* (high information about work/self-sufficiency and high individualization)
- *Particularistic* (low information about work/self-sufficiency and high individualization)
- *Routinized* (high information about work/self-sufficiency and low individualization)
- *Instrumental* (low information about work/self-sufficiency and low individualization)

The ideal transaction that reflects the policy ideals were transformational and appeared in 18% of the interviews while most (55%) were considered instrumental, which makes processing claims efficient (Meyers et al., 1998).

Although it is difficult to measure a positive client-worker relationship, Hill & Cain used perceived welfare caseworker support as a measure of relationship quality and a tool to measure psychological distress as a client outcome (T. Hill & Cain, 2012). "The average respondent exhibited low levels of psychological distress and moderate levels of perceived caseworker support" (T. Hill & Cain, 2012). "This pattern suggests that women who perceive their caseworkers to be interested, caring, and helpful also tend to exhibit lower levels of psychological distress" (T. Hill & Cain, 2012).

Structural Constraints

Concrete examples of structural constraints are not enough staff for caseload (Austin et al., 2009; Morgen, 2001) and too much paperwork "…staff estimate that 90 percent of their time is taken up with paperwork and data entry responsibilities" which takes away from the more transformative work with clients (Sandfort, 2000). Less tangible examples of structural constraints include management practices. Management approaches differ in the public and private areas of service delivery (Sandfort, 2000). "Managers in public bureaucracy must wrestle with the constant challenges of isolation and resistance to change, managers in the private organizations struggle to offer clear direction and inspire motivation" (Sandfort, 2000). "In spite of dramatically different organizational conditions and service technologies, frontline staff members in both the public bureaucracy and private contractors develop impressions about their environment from their collective

experiences" (Sandfort, 1999). This informal structural construct develops into "…the collective beliefs shared among street-level human service staff seem to be important factors influencing how inter-organizational collaboration is implemented" (Sandfort, 1999).

Culture is an additional structural constraint that frontline workers operate in that may help or hinder helping clients reach self-sufficiency. "Welfare organizations have preserved regulatory organizational cultures that stress meeting policy-based goals (like WPR) without the accompanying cultural shifts that promote value-based goals (i.e. well-being and self-sufficiency)" (Thaden & Robinson, 2010). "Welfare organizations have not fostered the necessary cultural and structural changes to enable frontline staff to use their discretion to actualize client well-being (Thaden & Robinson, 2010). "…agencies need to continue to develop methods for ensuring consistent service quality, improve coordination through the development of strong automated management information systems, and, as more individuals reach time limits, develop methods to ensure that all partners in the system implement these limits fairly and equitably" (Martinson & Holcomb, 2002).

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